

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Teesside University		
Unit of Assessment: 32		
Title of case study: Curating the Past: Commemoration, Memory and Conversations in Ireland		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016 to 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Roisin Higgins	Reader in Modern History	Sep 2013 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Research at the Centre for Culture and Creativity at Teesside University has introduced the public to new ways of interpreting commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising and deepened understanding of how historical objects and events are used to create meaning and frame conversations in the present. Our research has empowered audiences, from local groups to the Irish diaspora, to share memories and exchange ideas, illuminating and challenging their assumptions about past events. Through partnerships with cultural institutions, community groups and the media, research on commemoration has provided an interpretative framework for historical memory which is inclusive of diverse traditions, creating space for greater public empathy and understanding.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Higgins has published extensively on the significance of the 1916 Easter Rising and how its meaning has changed over time. The Rising has become an iconic event that is imbued with immense, if volatile, social and political power. As a result, Easter 1916 has been used through its commemorations to convey cultural and societal values and to underpin contemporary political and economic positions. In interpreting this process, Higgins's work asserts that anniversaries of the Rising are best understood as discursive spaces. She has shown how the significance of Easter Week 1916 has lain more in its symbolic capital than in the literal reading of events. The meaning of the Rising, Higgins argues, is not stable but is instead an ongoing negotiation among a range of constituents, including historians, politicians, artists, intellectuals and other members of the public.

The initial focus of Higgins's work was on the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising and demonstrated how, in 1966, the commemoration was used as a medium through which to showcase Irish modernity and as a platform for debates over the future direction of the Irish economy and society. [3.1] Higgins's work also argues however that 1916 commemorations became vehicles through which legitimacy was both asserted and challenged. The memory of the Rising has been deployed to underscore the authority of the state but, as a revolutionary moment, it has also offered socialists, feminists and republicans a way of challenging that authority. Higgins's research provides a way of understanding how representations of the past can carry heightened political currency by being given different emphasis and meaning by successive generations. In this way, the research reveals history to be an ongoing process of co-creation, emerging from communities and societies, reimagining and retelling stories of the past. Higgins has shown how the Easter Rising was being mythologised even as it unfolded and the Irish revolution, during which the Rising took place, was being commemorated before it had ended. Her work on these aspects of memory and commemoration highlights that the line between past and present is extremely porous [3.1, 3.2, 3.3].

Much of the choreography of commemorations of the Easter Rising was established during its first anniversary and Higgins's work, in tracing patterns of remembrance

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across one hundred years, shows how rituals and material objects were used to sustain the idea that the integrity of the original event was being recaptured in annual observance [3.2]. However, her work also shows that each act of commemoration reshapes and re-imagines that which is being remembered and the material of the past has the potential to represent covert, illicit, defiant memories and offer receptacles of resistance to formalized social memory. Higgins argues that the success of the Easter Rising as a commemorative instrument lies not in its certainties but in its adaptability in the nation's memory [3.2, 3.3]. The original event is perceived as a rupture in the imaginative horizon and its memory carries the weight of both great hope and extreme disillusionment. As a result, significant anniversaries of the Easter Rising are freighted with emotional and political expectation [3.2, 3.3].

Higgins's work demonstrates the ways in which commemorations are multi-layered processes that enable communities to make sense of the present through engagement with history. Her research is animated by the view that the memory of the past is never settled. It reveals the dynamic interplay between past and present and how it can be used to challenge historical certainties and to open up spaces of creativity and critical engagement [3.1, 3.2].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[3.1] Higgins R. 2016. The 'incorruptible inheritors of 1916': the battle for ownership of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. Saothar: The Journal of Irish Labour History. Summer, 33-44. Selected for REF2021.

[3.2] Higgins R. 2016. 'The Irish Republic was proclaimed by poster': The politics of commemorating the Easter Rising. In Grayson R, McGarry F. eds. Remembering 1916. Cambridge University Press. 43-61. Selected for REF2021.

[3.3] Higgins R. 2017. Commemoration and the Irish Revolution. In Crowley J, O'Driscoll D, Murphy M, Borganovo J. eds. Atlas of the Irish Revolution. Cork University Press. 848-856.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Higgins's research has shaped understanding of historical memory by engaging the public in active processes of memory work, creating spaces of commemoration and opening up conversations about the relationship between the past and present. The research has provided an interpretative framework for subjects ranging from the Easter Rising to the history of everyday objects. By challenging historical certainties and listening to multiple voices, the research has made room for participants to question cultural and social assumptions and to develop avenues for greater understanding between the north and south of Ireland and within Irish communities abroad.

The EUR10,000,000 GPO Museum is a permanent visitor attraction located within the historic GPO (General Post Office) building on O'Connell Street, Dublin. It was opened in 2016 and seeks to provide a highly immersive and engaging exhibition that tells the story of the events of Easter Week in 1916. Research undertaken at Teesside University on Irish history and commemoration informed directly the shape and concept of the museum's Commemoration Gallery. Employed as a historical consultant, Higgins wrote the content for the gallery's full-wall panel which charts the history of Ireland, North and South, in the decades after the Rising. (This was the only section of the exhibition that had government input, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, which reviewed and commented on the narrative to ensure it was a balanced and fair account) [5.1]. For the then Head of Content at Martello Media Ltd (who led the content team for the GPO Witness History exhibition), Roisín's input 'contributed to us improving the quality of evidence, enhancing public understanding and potentially challenging cultural values and social assumptions...Roisín played an essential role in bringing together such an important, and sensitive, narrative' [5.1]. At the museum's opening in Dublin in 2016 the Irish Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht described it as one of the flagship projects in the Centenary Programme and 'a fantastic addition to Dublin's

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bustling tourism sector, enhancing the city's heritage offering for locals and visitors alike' [5.2]. The GPO Museum received over 180,000 visitors in its first year [5.1b]. It won both the Best Cultural Experience at the 2017 Irish Tourism Industry Awards and the 2017 European Museum Academy Luigi Micheletti Award in 2017 [5.3]. The judges for the Luigi Micheletti Award said: 'the Centre is a perfect example of 20th century history in retrospect, dealing in an even-handed way with a very emotive subject, which would have been impossible even a decade ago. It is an extraordinary achievement, an historical challenge [which] has been transformed into a reconciliation centre which also poses questions for the future. Our warmest congratulations go to the whole team' [5.3]. For the then Education Manager at the GPO Museum: 'the judges made specific reference to the fact that the narrative did not stop after the Irish Civil War, but in fact examined the contested recent history of the north of Ireland. They stated that [the GPO Museum] is a centre of peace and reconciliation. Roisín's valuable contribution was pivotal to this' [5.1].

Research on Irish history and commemoration undertaken by Higgins has also shaped public discourse through a range of different media. Higgins, for instance, was commissioned in 2016 by the Arts Council of Ireland to write a reflective essay which responded to the multi-layered memory traces in the musical programme of the televised centenary concert, A Nation's Voice and was invited to write the explanatory text for a section of the multi-media online exhibition 1916: Weaving Private and Public Narratives [5.4]. Higgins's contribution explained the significance of material objects in both anchoring the memory of the Rising and also providing symbols of potential resistance. The exhibition was hosted by the Digital Repository of Ireland in association with the National Archives, National Library and National Museum of Ireland [5.5].

In recognition of the fact that her research on issues of memory and commemoration in Irish history 'commands enormous respect', Higgins participated in the Department of Foreign Affairs-funded Easter Rising Centenary programme for the diaspora [5.6]. She was invited to speak at events in Rome (Roma Tre, Jan. 2016); Boston (Boston College, March 2016) Atlanta (Georgia State University, (April 2016) and Melbourne (University of Melbourne and Victoria University, April 2016) and, one host noted, 'made a vital contribution to the overall success' of the programme [5.6]. During the Centenary period, Higgins gave fifteen public talks on remembering the Rising in venues ranging from Dungiven Parish Hall (March 2016); Coolock Civic Centre, Dublin (April 2016); and Moyle District Council Buildings, Ballycastle (August 2016). In Ballymena, Co. Antrim (August, 2016), a local political representative noted that the audience had gained a new understanding of how it was possible to question some aspects of the past without feeling that everything important would unravel, an important reflection in a divided society [5.7].

Higgins's work on material objects as receptacles of memory led to her role as presenter on National Treasures, a television programme broadcast on RTÉ in 2018. Described as 'an anti-capitalist Antiques' Roadshow', it told the history of Ireland through objects brought by members of the public to televised events across the country [5.8]. It was an example of history being co-created by a number of constituencies. Items selected by Higgins and her co-presenters formed an exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland, Country Life. One of the producers of the show noted that Higgins's 'knowledge, research and expertise informed the roadshow, exhibition, television series, digital archive and follow-on book, providing the historical merit and emotional triggers to generate wide audience engagement. ... she contributed to a huge degree in the success of the project' [5.9]. The National Treasures project had significant reach. The viewing figures for the television series received a 25% audience share (380,000 viewers) which then increased to 30% by end of the four episodes. The expected viewership for RTÉ in this slot (6.30pm on a Sunday) is 15%. The number of visitors to the Country Life Museum increased by 25% after the television programme was broadcast [5.10] and it was noted that 'an all-island project exploring the contentious history was a huge challenge and Roisín was a key to surmounting that challenge' [5.10]. One viewer tweeted how they had enjoyed the show's concept and

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that it had put history in hands of the people [5.12]. Another expressed how National Treasures had provided a platform for discussing objects with contested histories [5.12].

Higgins's research on Irish history and the Easter Rising has led to a more nuanced and deeper public understanding and engagement with the complexities of commemorating the revolutionary period. The importance of this work is best reflected in a 2020 speech by the President of Ireland as part of a Centenary Commemorations Address which directly references Higgins's research. As he states: 'commemoration [is] an important aspect of ethical remembering. However, discretion is required with regard to how we mark important historical events, particularly those that may be exploited for narrow political or partisan purposes... Time and again, we have seen how history can be used and abused for insidious, morally dubious, purposes. As historian Roisín Higgins puts it, "[The] fractious nature of the revolutionary period has created many possibilities for commemorative events, as well as a great deal of potential for division"' [5.12].

Higgins's research, in acknowledging and understanding the divisive nature of certain aspects of the past, has shaped memory spaces and public conversations that are reflective and inclusive in the present.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] Email correspondence (pdf) from the GPO Museum team. Testimonial from the Head of Content at Martello Media (2014-2016). Received on 01 March 2019. Testimonial from the Education Manager at GPO Museum (2016-18). Received on 08 February 2019.

[5.2] News item (pdf and link). Merrion Street. 2016. Taoiseach opens GPO Witness History Visitor Centre. Available at: <https://merrionstreet.ie/en/news-room/releases/taoiseach-opens-gpo-witness-history-visitor-centre.html>

[5.3] Webpages for awards (pdf and link). Luigi Micheletti Award. 2017. Luigi Micheletti Award 2017 Winner: GPO Witness History – Dublin (Ireland). Available at: https://www.luigimichelettiaward.eu/winners/dettaglio_winner.asp?id=79. Irish Tourism Industry Awards. 2017. Irish Tourism Industry Awards 2017 – The Winners. Available at: <https://www.irishtourismindustryawards.ie/2017-winners/>

[5.4] Webpage (pdf and link). Arts Council Ireland. 2016. A Nation's Voice: A Response by Roisín Higgins. Available at: http://www.artscouncil.ie/Art-2016/A-Nation_s-Voice/

[5.5] Webpage (pdf and link). Inspiring Ireland. Remembering the Rising. In 1916: Weaving Private and Public Narratives, exhibition hosted by the Digital Repository of Ireland. Available at: <https://inspiring-ireland.ie/search/1916-weaving-public-private-narratives>

[5.6] Signed Letters (pdf). Testimonial from Professor at Boston College (USA). Received 24 October 2020. Testimonial from Professor at University of York (UK). Received 23 October 2020.

[5.7] Email correspondence (pdf). Testimonial from Philip McGuigan MLA, organiser of Ballymena Braid Centre event. Received 26 October 2020.

[5.8] Review (pdf and link). Irish Times. 2018. National Treasures: a hoarder's dream, like an anti-capitalist Antiques Roadshow. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/national-treasures-a-hoarder-s-dream-like-an-anti-capitalist-antiques-roadshow-1.3454816>

[5.9] Signed Letter (pdf). Testimonial from Produced of National Treasures. EZ Films. Received on 02 May 2019.

[5.10] Email correspondence (pdf). Testimonial from Education & Learning Manager at the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life. Received 13 December 2018.

[5.11] Collated Tweets (pdf) from the public about National Treasures. 08 April 2018 to 15 April 2018.

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[5.12] Transcript (pdf and link). President of Ireland. 2020. Centenary Commemorations Address. Of Centenaries and the Hospitality Necessary in Reflecting on Memory, History and Forgiveness. Available at: <https://president.ie/en/diary/details/president-hosts-machnamh-100-event/speeches>